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Human Rights the Marianist Way

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Last summer, students piloted a new framework for human rights, applying the Marianist model of working in community. Collaborating with residents of Sangilo, Malawi, the students' results will make a difference for the people they met, and also will influence the way human rights work is done.

"YOUR LIFE IS OVER."

A tired grandmother with a crooked back told her orphaned granddaughter to give up — at age 14. Little Alinafe Kachenje, who after school foraged in the forest to feed her hungry siblings, had received top honors in her class. But Grandmother could not afford the fees for secondary school. The girl, she said, must marry.

Kachenje refused. "I asked one of my teachers, ‘Where can I find hope?'"

Hope is hard to come by in her village of Sangilo, Malawi, in southern Africa, which is one reason University of Dayton students are going there to learn about human rights. Among the least developed and most densely populated countries, Malawi has many children like Kachenje: orphaned by AIDS, malnourished, without access to clean water, and forced from school into work or marriage to survive.

In decades past, the way to "solve" the problem would have been for international organizations to swoop in and hand out money, dig wells and build roads — if a village was so lucky. Change could be temporary and was often based on the donor's wishes, not the people's desires.

UD is doing it differently. In the summer of 2014, five students continued the University's work within a new framework for human rights: collaborate with the residents to define goals based on strengths and needs, then develop and implement plans using local and donor resources to improve the quality of life. It's a way of applying the Marianist model of working in community to education in human rights, politics, economics, education, engineering and more. Their results will not only make a difference in Sangilo; they will influence the way human rights work is done, with UD students and faculty at the forefront of finding hope.

SEEING PEOPLE, NOT PROBLEMS

Five UD students look out of their home-fired brick rooms and onto one of the world's largest and deepest freshwater lakes: Lake Malawi. Every day they pull back mosquito nets and rise with the sun, greeted by the pinks and oranges that warm to bright blue skies as they scatter throughout the Karonga district in northern Malawi to talk with the people about what matters to them most: the education and safety of their children; access to clean water; how to survive the drought.

This was their life last summer as members of the second cohort of UD's Malawi Research Practicum on Rights and Development. During the eight-week collaborative summer research experience, students of many majors conceive independent research projects from half a world away, travel to talk with the people of Malawi and then return to report on their findings.

This is not ecotourism or sightseeing, though they do see beautiful sights. It is not study abroad, but it is research abroad, where students see not a problem but a people.

"It drives my head, and it drives my heart, too," said Meredith Pacenta, a senior political science and human rights major who researched the moral development of Malawian schoolchildren. "It's about being open to what God has in store for me to learn.

"The point of the research is to change the conversations."

These traits — dedication and adaptability — are what professors like Richard Ghere look for when choosing from among the applicants for this selective practicum. The University covers all expenses except pocket money, a signal of the practicum's importance to the University's educational strategies. In return, the University expects students will share their research with the local communities and with others through conference presentations.

Before students leave for Malawi, Ghere conducts a semester of workshops — for which the students get no credit — to help them refine their topic and prepare for life in another culture. He also shares with them his experience of visiting Malawi in 2013.

"Collecting data from the people across the street is hard — this is who I am, this is why I am here," the political science professor told them. "It's even tougher when you're U.S. citizens and you're showing up at their houses asking questions."

The seeds for the practicum started in 2010 with a few students and their individual drives to explore human rights in a nation known for its kind people and extreme poverty. Through those experiences, said Jason Pierce, interim dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, "we learned how a place like Malawi provides a learning opportunity for students from across the university."

So in summer 2013, the political science department initiated the practicum — open to students from any major — with a research base at Maji Zuwa, a social entrepreneurship lodge in Sangilo Village.

They picked Malawi and Maji Zuwa in part because of an alumnus who pledged his heart to the nation. Matt Maroon '06 volunteered with the Marianists in Malawi for what was supposed to be a year, a temporary detour between undergraduate studies and law school. He found both a need and an opportunity, and one year has become nine and counting. He founded the Maji Zuwa lodge and the nongovernmental organization Determined to Develop. He also is the practicum's site coordinator, providing direction, contacts and translators for the students.

Said Pierce, "He's just a terrific illustration of the Marianist charism in action and a terrific mentor for our human rights students."

It's a lot to expect a young adult to live in a developing country, conduct research and influence local

conversations about topics critical to life. But UD is providing the opportunity in part because students are demanding it, Pierce said. As UD's human rights studies program has grown, students want hands-on experience, what in academic lingo is called experiential learning and intercultural competency.

The students translate it in different ways: holding close an AIDS orphan; watching a woman collect water from a contaminated well; listening to a boy whose father beats him if he does not fish at night.

Their research is both quantitative — such as counting and mapping wells — and qualitative, relying on the time and stories of local people to paint a picture of the community's challenges and assets.

And it has the potential to turn into a University of Dayton sub-Saharan human rights research base where successive years of students can build on others' research to affect real change. After only two cohorts, students can already point to projects on which their research is being applied.

THE "WARM HEART OF AFRICA"

Unless you work in human rights, you may not know of Malawi. It lies below the equator on the eastern portion of the continent, a long, land-locked country with a mostly rural population. It has a short wet season and a long dry season that is becoming longer and drier, a burden for a country that derives 90 percent of its gross domestic product from farming.

The former British protectorate is not rich in natural resources and therefore did not receive infrastructure development like other African nations under colonial rule. Travel outside the capital and larger cities is difficult; it takes seven hours to drive 230 miles from the capital, Lilongwe, to Maji Zuwa at a cost of $10 a gallon for fuel.

Its challenges are many, including a high HIV infection rate resulting in more than 700,000 AIDS orphans, according to UNICEF. Nearly half of the country's population is under age 14.

But if you do know one thing about Malawi, it might be the friendliness of its people. It is known as the "warm heart of Africa."

"They not only accept you but even call you their own, " Pacenta said. "If I was visiting their school, I was part of the school for the day. Or at Maji Zuwa, I was part of Maji Zuwa. Those little boys [orphans living at the lodge] were my little brothers for eight weeks."

That warmth is just one of the reasons why Malawi makes a good research base for UD.

Another is the Marianists.

The Marianists have been in Malawi since 1960 when they accepted an invitation from the local bishop, first opening Nkhata Bay Secondary School and then operating Chaminade Secondary School in Karonga. The brothers also founded Mzuzu Technical School to teach trades to children. In the early 1970s, Brother George Dury '30 started a reforestation initiative and oversaw the planting of a half million trees over three decades. Fifteen years ago, the Marianists founded MIRACLE, a model of vocational learning for AIDS orphans and microfinance for AIDS widows. That was where Maroon did his service.

Brother Thomas Njari, S.M., director of MIRACLE, said the Marianists are educating for intellect, morality and spirituality. He can see the impact of the brothers beyond his school. "Everywhere in the country, you are going to find our students."

Ghere said there are other reasons to choose Malawi as a research base. Its political system works, with democratic rule and peaceful transition of power among elected officials from throughout the nation's three regions. Ethnic and religious groups — predominantly Christian with a significant Muslim population — get along. The climate is good during Dayton's summer (Malawi's winter), with temperatures in the low 80s.

It's a nation that relies on others, with 36 percent of government revenue coming from donor support. With all the NGOs in the country, there are already a lot of college students boarding planes for Malawi. That includes UD students, who since 2011 have worked in Malawi through ETHOS to provide appropriate technology solutions to supply drinking water, energy, irrigation systems and more.

And there's Maroon. "Students benefit from the capital Matt has earned over the years," Ghere said. Maroon was on faculty at the local University of Livingstonia for four years, and he arranges for Malawian students to work with UD students as translators. He even knows the U.S. ambassador, whom he hosted for Thanksgiving along with 100 of the children whose schooling his NGO supports.

His connections get students interviews with everyone from schoolteachers to government officials. This summer, he connected junior Andrew Lightner with Victor Mwalwimba, the local government agriculture extension worker, who also provided translation. "I got one more interview every day than I had expected," said Lightner, a political science major, economics minor and UD soccer defensive back. On the way to each interview, Mwalwimba offered background on cotton farming, livestock or the topic of the day. This allowed Lightner to jump right into the conversation. "That was a huge advantage for me," he said. "Any of my successes really stem from that."

Maroon has cultivated his relationship with UD, too, where students operate a chapter of Determined to Develop, educating their classmates about the country and organizing fundraising events. Last year they raised $10,000 to build a new school near Sangilo Village on land the local leaders gave to

Maroon.

LEARNING TO TALK ABOUT THE WEATHER

During his interviews with local people, Lightner didn't want to talk about the weather.

In the States, it can be a euphemism for polite talk on an inconsequential topic. But for the farmers in Malawi, weather was the most important thing.

"Six months of prep work, and you think you know things," said Lightner of the research he conducted before leaving for Malawi. "But you learn really quickly that you know nothing. I knew nothing."

He read that currency devaluation had been devastating for the economy. He wanted to ask farmers about it to understand the local impact of macroeconomic policies. "They are in a five-year drought, with every year getting worse," he said. "When I talked about 2012, when the currency was close to worthless, they only talked about the drought of 2012."

He listened and adapted, and he switched his research to what was important to them: how to survive the economic stresses caused by drought.

Lightner talked with Jean, a local farm leader, next to a tree outside her home as a large pig snored nearby. She showed her visitors the compost system she teaches to other farmers, using leaves and manure to keep moisture in the parched soil.

From other farmers he learned that goats often give birth to twins twice a year. Farmers say they keep goats as insurance against a bad winter harvest. In practice, they are more likely to go hungry in winter and sell their goats in August to pay for their children's schooling. "They are incentivizing investment in the future, but they then are suffering the negative effects of malnutrition," he said.

Lightner, whose international travel experience previously extended only to Toronto, said the economic lessons in Malawi were also lessons about living in the United States. "You realize how much we don't have to worry about," he said. "You might say, 'I don't like Wall Street, I don't like banks,' until you can't get a loan for less than 200 percent interest. … Instead, we get to go out and worry about doing our job right or having a good family life."

His change in research direction happened thanks to Maroon offering insight and resources and his fellow cohort members being open every day to discussing what they learned and what they didn't know.

Pacenta also changed directions, pairing her interest in faith formation with exploring the moral and

spiritual development of children. She visited 11 schools and asked the children if they believed in God. But why did they believe in God? To the teachers and headmasters, she'd ask what made one church-sponsored school different from another. Often, it was only the text of the morning prayer.

"My mentality wasn't honed in on finding a problem," she said. "It was really what's going on, what's happening here, what role is Christianity playing in the schools and what role is it playing in their community. Is that supporting the development of children and what are the morals and values that they have?"

Daniela Porcelli '14 also interviewed students at schools, building on previous research on gender identity and asking whether violence plays a role in a girl's decision to drop out of school. She described an interview with a 15-year-old who was hanging laundry outside her home, a baby fastened to her back with a green and gold patterned cloth. The girl had been accepted into secondary school, but her stepmother's physical and verbal abuse and refusal to pay for school fees forced her to marry at 13.

"Two years later, with a baby and an unemployed husband, she wished she had endured the abuse for a while longer," said Porcelli, who graduated in May with degrees in English and human rights. "I discovered forms of verbal, physical and sexual violence add to the discontinuation of school, while poverty is the overarching reason."

When people are poor, they lack basic resources. International organizations can step in to help. Jason Hayes, a human rights major, saw evidence of that literally written all over northern Malawi. He mapped drinking water locations and saw the names of donors scratched in the concrete around wells and water boreholes. Too often, he found them broken and contaminated. Sometimes, communities were not provided training on how to maintain the pump. In others, they could not raise the funds to cover repairs.

"In order to do what's really needed, what's really necessary for the community, you need that information," he said. "You need to know what the community needs, wants, is feasible, so research is incredibly important. ... It's an experience that's not afforded to very many undergraduate students."

He found that villages with active borehole committees were in better shape to repair their systems. The best-functioning system was one where an NGO built the water supply then compelled citizens to pay a small amount each month into a community repair fund. This system, though, also took from the citizens self-determination and local autonomy, also human rights, Hayes noted.

PACHOKO, PACHOKO

Now back in the States, the most recent cohort is writing up its results. Most students will create a report and present it at a local conference.

But it won't just be paper sitting on a shelf.

Each student will also share the results back with the people who spent so much time with them, the farmers, teachers and officials who shared themselves and their struggles with these foreign students. It's one way to address a common complaint in human rights, that the people affected never see the results of the studies in which they participate. It's also a way for the people to take the findings and develop their own solutions.

That's what Maroon thinks will happen with the schools visited by Panceta. The local Catholic bishop, Martin Mtumbuka, is interested in how her research could help inform changes in curriculum to distinguish a Catholic education from that of other schools. Panceta hopes her research contributes in the spirit of a popular local phrase, *pachoko pachoko*, which in Chitumbuka means "little by little."

During his research on child labor and night fishing, senior human rights major Jed Gerlach uncovered best practices from surrounding villages that could be used by local leaders to address their child health, safety and educational concerns.

Maroon has plans, too. Education research by Porcelli will help Maroon as he develops a new national high school also serving local needs identified through research done by previous UD students. And this fall he developed a goat-based microfinance program for female-headed households. It's an application of Lightner's findings: livestock can help the women weather economic stresses, and the women will share the wealth by passing kid goats to other women.

And then there's water. One of the officials Hayes interviewed was the Karonga scheme manager of Malawi's Northern Region Water Board. He is implementing a $150 million foreign aid grant that will give tens of thousands of villagers the opportunity to have reliable, clean water at their homes for the first time. Maroon asked the manager why he chose the construction area to include Sangilo Village. The manager's answer: "[Hayes is] here, Maroon is here, we've got our friends here, so why not?"

Clearly, Maroon sees benefit in the partnership between UD and Determined to Develop. And so does UD. It has already selected the students who will travel there in summer 2015. Pierce said that the program's success will grow the possibilities, with plans to strengthen ties with additional Malawian universities and with NGOs that could employ UD students as researchers or use their findings to build development programs.

"I'm excited about the opportunity for the University and how the partnership with someone like Matt

can facilitate learning in a deep, deep way," Pierce said.

Ghere also sees possibilities for growth. Practicum students could partner with UD's ETHOS engineers, as one practicum student did in 2013. Students could also spend more than eight weeks in Malawi. Ghere said more time would allow students to visit the capital and better understand the center of power for both the national government and NGOs.

In the meantime, Maroon is continuing to spread his message about what appropriate, collaborative development can accomplish. This fall, he brought to campus three of the children his organization sponsors. They stood before UD students and explained the realities of their lives and the power of human rights development.

Now age 18, Alinafe Kachenje is barley 5 feet tall with a determination that doubled her stature at the podium. "Where can I find hope? "The answer: Through organizations like Maroon's, which paid for her schooling.

But human rights development — *chitukuko* (pronounced chee-too-ku-ko) in the local vernacular — is more than handing out school fees. It's the energy that students like those from UD bring to her community. It's good to know other people care, she said. It's another reason for hope. And their research and contributions help create projects on which she can contribute. Kachenje is learning about the goat microfinance, working with the women to spread the wealth while awaiting results from the national exam that will determine if she can attend college.

And this hope? It's all UD's fault, Maroon said. The seed of servant-leadership was planted deep, and it flowered in Malawi. Referring to Maji Zuwa, he said, "It permeates our campus as well."

"We're able to give our UD students a really practical, hands-on research experience that is meant to complement that classroom experience," he said. "It's exciting because we're doing a better job at it each year. As it started out, it was this experiment to see whether this could work. We're at a point now where yes, it does. It has. It will.

"We get to start thinking about the bigger questions of how this can impact not just our small area but the greater northern region of Malawi, Malawi as a country, and Africa and the developing world as a whole."

By Michelle Tedford, editor of the University of Dayton Magazine